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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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- The University of Chicago Student Government
- The University of Illinois at Chicago

About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

pro-Western and supposedly pro-Russian camps stood different class coalitions that were asymmetrical in their political capacity. That’s why the pro-Western camp is dominating right now: it was the camp of professional middle classes allied with transnational capital joined by opportunistic groups of elites.

On the other side, there were political capitalists —they’re usually called “oligarchs” in the discussion of post-Soviet politics. Political capitalism is a more precise term for the fraction of the capitalist class whose main competitive advantage are the selective state benefits, which makes them different from the other fractions of the capitalist class who rely on technological innovation or the super-exploitation of the labor force. The working-class interests in this class conflict didn’t have autonomous articulation and representation. The workers at the large post-Soviet factories were working primarily for the former Soviet markets. Workers in heavy industry were typically following the so-called pro-Russian camp, but usually only as passive voters, not activists.

The pro-Western camp had much more of civil society aligned with it, not just TV pundits, but most intellectuals, independent media, even universities such as Kyiv-Mohyla. Many were supported from the West, which funded the NGOs, the think tanks, advocacy organizations, and media that were creating the space for political discussion (in a “pro-Western” discursive framework) and civic mobilization. And they could offer some vision of pro-Western development for Ukraine, even if discussion believed that this whole regional cleavage was taken, simply manipulation by elite factions who were instrumentalizing those questions without reflecting social reality. Those critics would say that there are actually no regions in Ukraine with the exception of Galicia and, perhaps, Donbas, but all the other regions of Ukraine in between have weak regional cultures, or any history behind those regions.

DL: 22 Ukraines?

VI: That requires discussing the regional cleavage in Ukraine. Some believe that this is an ethnic conflict between Russian speakers and Ukrainian speakers. They see something like symmetrical camps on both sides of this divide. However, another side of the discussion believed that this whole regional cleavage was taken, simply manipulation by elite factions who were instrumentalizing those questions without reflecting social reality. Those critics would say that there are actually no regions in Ukraine with the exception of Galicia and, perhaps, Donbas, but all the other regions of Ukraine in between have weak regional cultures, or any history behind those regions.

DL: 22 Ukraines?

VI: That’s a phrase used. This leaves a question, why are those 22 Ukraines on the ground translated into just two political camps? They don’t have an answer to that. And typically, this argument about 22 Ukraines collapses into the argument about just one Ukraine that is pro-Western, pro-nationalist Ukraine, overcoming the legacies of Russian domination. That view then sees the Eastern part of Ukraine, or basically all the political representatives of those regions, as a post-colonial legacy, which didn’t have any roots in the Ukrainian reality. This turns into a simplistic, nation-building narrative. That’s not an explanation but a construction of reality. And it turns dangerously close to the argument about “internal occupation” promoted by the far Right before 2014.

My argument is that there was a real social conflict behind that political cleavage. This was an asymmetrical class conflict. Behind the supposedly mobilizations did not reflect the mood of the majority. The Eastern camp could win electoral majorities, comparably Anti-Maidan against the stronger “pro-Western” mobilizations, even though these mobilization and they couldn’t counter with anything also didn’t have the capacity for sustained civic development in the supposedly “pro-Russian” camp, unlike the Western camp. In fact, the “pro-Russian” development in the supposedly “pro-Russian” camp, The problem was that there was no project of looking, even if it’s just a carrot in front of a donkey. 15. But still, the promise of Europe was forward-Intensify of violence during the Donbas War in 2014–number of people who work in heavy industry and the that there is a significant correlation between the industries. There are quantitative studies that show the EU was damaging for or Ukraine’s most advanced The deep and comprehensive free-trade zone with a significant part of the Ukrainian working class. path to EU and NATO integration was damaging to after the Russians invaded. At the same time, the Union is uncertain. The discussion only started now, the integration of Ukraine into the European because there was no real offer until recently. Even The European integration of Ukraine is problematic segment of Ukrainian population partially delusional and marginalizing for a large of pro-Western development for Ukraine, even if partially delusional and marginalizing for a large of pro-Western development for Ukraine, even if

and the Left-wing politicization of the student mobilization proved to be weak. That’s what we seen in the Euromaidan Revolution, when the students were not even capable of articulating their specific student grievances and just went after the shallow oppositional slogans. The only thing that united the people during the Euromaidan was getting rid of Yanukovich. That’s a peculiar thing about contemporary revolutions: they are united by shallow, vague common denominators, and do not grow from the material interests of the social groups.

DL: What was the new Left in Ukraine? You’ve written about the new Left as reacting to what was seen as an old, post-Soviet Left — like with the Communist Party of Ukraine that you have a whole chapter on? — and the sense that we needed to break from that. In the post-Soviet situation, there were migrant workers in West Ukraine who wanted to be integrated more into Europe, but then there was also the South-East Ukrainian situation. You have written about how the “political capitalists” in the Donbas region were able to stabilize the effects of post-Soviet Union deindustrialization. Can you talk about how that situation framed the political question at times as regional cleavages, or affected how the Left thought of itself in Ukraine?

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he won the election in 2004. Just two years after the Orange Revolution, Yushchenko invited Yanukovich to lead the cabinet to become the Prime Minister. And five years after the Orange Revolution, in 2010, Yanukovich fairly wins the presidential election. Many people asked the question, what has actually changed after the revolution? The main parties of the pro-Western bloc were seriously discussing creating a “big coalition” with the Party of Regions,” the party which was supporting Viktor Yanukovich. Clearly, the ruling class in the country did not change. The institutions did not change. What happened? One of the responses was the radicalization of nationalists who started to believe that, if nothing changed after a peaceful revolution, the next revolution should be violent. Perhaps with spilling blood, Ukraine would have some real change and could get rid of what the nationalists perceived as the “internal occupation” regime in Ukraine. Basically, they didn’t believe that post-Soviet Ukraine was properly Ukrainian. They thought, rather, that everything in the country was still being controlled by a post-Communist elite that impeded building the Ukrainian nation defined through anti-Russian and anti-Communist identity. It was a very specific ethnic-nationalist project that started to be realized since 2014 and even more so since 2022. Another response was from the West via expansion of democracy-promotion programs and pouring money into pro-Western NGO sectors. And finally, a different, and far less consequential response came about from the people who didn’t see much of a substantial difference between the two major political camps in Ukraine, and thus believed that Ukraine needed a different force, one that would appeal to the majority of the population across the regional and ethno-linguistic divides, and to appeal to the issues that were uniting the country, not dividing the country. That sounded great, but it didn’t work. So the new Left remained marginal. There were some positive dynamics happening before the Euromaidan Revolution (2013–14). The biggest successes were in the student movement. There was a significant anarchist, Left-libertarian-leaning student union, which was capable of leading a couple large campaigns. DL: This was a strike in 2009?

VI: Yes, and in 2010. There were a couple of years competing with Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko was the pro-Western and pro-nationalist candidate, and steal the elections by Viktor Yanukovich who was the second revolution in Ukraine.” As a reminder: the Orange Revolution was against an attempt to disappoinment with the Orange Revolution in 2004, new Left, which appeared mostly in response to the the 1990s. I participated in the second wave of the Communist Party, but they were marginalized in appeared during *perestroika*, typically outside of VI: Even before that. The first wave of the new Left emerging in Ukraine?

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Towards the abyss

An interview with Volodymyr Ishchenko

D. L. Jacobs

D. L. Jacobs: How did you get involved in the Left?

Volodymyr Ishchenko: The first thing was becoming political. I was politicized in high school. I described this experience in the preface of *Towards the Abyss*. I was born in 1982, and was socialized in a Soviet, then post-Soviet technical intelligentsia family with their typical reading circles. In particular, I was interested in the Soviet science fiction that raised perspectives about the communist future and asked very serious ethical and social questions. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, I felt the drastic divergence between my prospective life chances, possible career and the future I expected.

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Red Eureka

An interview with Tom Brennan, Arthur Dent, Tom Griffiths, and David McMullen

Harry H., Ryan M., Duncan P., and Tom P.

On December 7, 2022, *Platypus Affiliated Society* members Harry H., Ryan M., Duncan P., and Tom P. interviewed former Red Eureka Movement members Tom Brennan, Arthur Dent (also known as Albert Langer; he writes at 21stLeft.com),¹ Tom Griffiths,² and David McMullen (simplymarxism.com).³ An edited transcript follows.

Ryan M.: Where did you learn Marxism? What drew you to Marxism?

Arthur Dent: I object to the question; it reflects an academic disposition. The sharp distinction between us and the remnants of the Marxist intelligentsia that you're dealing with, is that we had to teach ourselves as part of a mass upheaval movement in the 60s. It required a better understanding of the politics, economics, philosophy, and history necessitated by issues like the Vietnam War and generational cultural change. A lot of people didn't get anything more than being opposed to U.S. imperialism in Vietnam, or being rebellious. But if you were part of the political leadership of that movement, you had to know more. We found ourselves in conflict with other people that claimed to be Marxist, in particular the revisionist party, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), was our main enemy. We had to learn what they were talking about regarding Vietnam. The three competing lines were: the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Left; the revisionists were pushing "stop the war, negotiate"; the Trotskyists and the ALP Left were saying, "bring the troops home"; and the Maoists were putting forwarding "Victory to the Vietcong." There wasn't a sharp policy distinction between the Maoists and Trotskyists on Vietnam: the two positions were in the direction of the Vietnamese winning and the Americans losing, and the two were also opposed to the CPA, which the Trotskyists insisted on calling Stalinist.

RM: Were people recruited to Marxism through the ALP, or perhaps on the shop floor?

Tom Griffiths: It was my first day at university. The Labor club was handing out the *Communist Manifesto* (1848). I read it quickly, and thought, "fuck, this is good." It was the dynamic spirit in it. From that moment, I knew the direction I'd be heading in: more and more *rebellious*. Now, that turned out to be the Maoists. They also had a more radical position in relation to Vietnam, which seemed to make sense to me. "Victory to the National Liberation Front." There was no pussyfooting around about it.

RM: Did you also learn autodidactically?

AD: In the 70s we would have educational activities and try to have serious discussions about theoretical questions. Later on, when the Red Eureka Movement (REM) was there, when we were desperately trying to get people to become theoreticians, they just didn't want to. They'd been involved in a mass movement, they were interested in theory from that practical perspective, but you're looking at the only three people who had an interest in theory in REM.

David McMullen: I went to Monash, where there was a

lot happening about Vietnam and other things. Later I got involved in Workers' Students Alliance (WSA). The Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) (CPA (ML)),⁴ had printed lots of cheap stuff, almost anything by Lenin, Marx, or Mao. I used to read a lot, and then unfortunately there was a period of five years where most of my diet was *Vanguard*, the newspaper of CPA (ML). Marxism became a religion.

TG: Did that diet have a constipating effect?

DM: It did indeed! And the big change was with Red Eureka, where everyone suddenly started thinking, rather than being straitjacketed.

Duncan P.: Did you ever visit China?

AD: As a teenager, I was into shortwave radio and I got bombarded with Peking media. I followed the polemics between the Chinese and the Russians in the 60s. I was following the Cultural Revolution closely, and getting a much broader picture than you'd get from *Peking Review*, much of which was just incomprehensible Chinglish. And a lot of the Red Guard material was too. But still you got a picture of the different factions fighting, and what they were saying to each other. I was in China in May 67 as a tourist. I remember meeting one of the top Red Guard leaders, Tan Houlan.⁵

DP: Did you identify yourself as a communist to them?

AD: They were treating me as communist royalty: I was made an honorary member of the Chingkangshan commune of the Red Guard. But I stress that I was a tourist not speaking Chinese. I thought, "these guys are rebels, they have a similar culture to what we do as rebels at Monash," which is a different experience to reading the *Peking Review*. They were rebels; they were the opposition in China, they were fighting against the authorities.

RM: Was there anyone from the Old Left — 1920s, 30, 40s — that you talked to about Marxism? Anyone who lived through 1917?

AD: 1917 is misleading. The people that we knew had been around in the 30s and 40s, which is different from 1917. There was an element of continuity. We could see that there was a generation before us that had likewise got the same perspective about capitalism, revolution, communism, etc. It wasn't like what it must feel like today, like you're completely isolated in time and space and there's never been much of a Left that you've got contact with. We're like an alien species that you're interviewing from a distance. There would've been people of our age now who we would've encountered when we were your age then.

RM: Do you remember them being optimistic, pessimistic, or neutral?

AD: Optimistic.

TG: Agreed.

AD: The ones from the CPA would be pessimistic. There were lots of pessimistic ex-communists. But the ones we were in contact with, the young rebel communists, were optimistic.

Tom P.: How do younger Leftists today, people who are struggling with this lack of a movement, look to you? What would you say to them?

AD: We didn't learn from our elders. It was a matter of being up against the system and looking around for some theory.

Harry H.: How did you experience the transition from Monash student politics of the 60s, into Red Eureka and *Discussion Bulletin* in the 70s?

DM: I saw the 70s as a flat period. Reading *Vanguard* every week, hoping that something will happen, or feeling warm and fuzzy about something. I did not feel that I had anything useful to say to people at work or generally. We didn't have a line about anything of any value, and just latched onto nationalism — Australian nationalism, independence.

TG: For example, things like the Eureka stockade.⁶

DM: WSA collapsed and then there was nothing. We came back together once the shit hit the fan over China. That's when people were energized by the polemicing. But we were still isolated. We were never a propaganda circle talking to people out there. We were just polemicing amongst ourselves.

TG: The Vietnam War conflict took up a lot of time and energy, as it deserved. But things collapsed after that, and there was a good reason for it: we won. In the mid to late 70s in REM, we spoke about this collapse, people's frustration, etc. And again, it was because we won. What else is going to happen? Of course things will divide after that. This exposes simultaneously a profound weakness in what we'd call the Left: there just wasn't a program. There wasn't a serious analysis, nor had there been for some time, of wanting to *seize* power and therefore have a view of how to use power. That wasn't taken seriously. And you need to take politics, people, and people's needs seriously.

RM: Did you see the task of the reading group or *Discussion Bulletin* to come up with the program?

DM: It never got beyond simply trashing our opponents.

Tom Brennan: But I thought at the time the idea was to develop a program. But it was a discussion group that never got around to what it was supposed to do.

RM: In *Discussion Bulletin* 3 you outline that it's open for dissent.⁷ You're welcoming dissenting views but also encouraging people to come in and propose ideas. Was anything on the table?

TG: But we didn't get it off the table. *Discussion Bulletin* was clearly urging everyone to take this problem seriously. The international communist movement had collapsed, and we had to come up with a program and analysis of the society we were in. It seems bizarre, but promptly, with Mao Tse-tung dying, the Gang of Four being overthrown, a coup d'état in China, the Albania line had popped up and announced that the principle contradiction in the world today was between the socialist camp led by the People's Republic of Albania and the other forces of reaction. Instead of that being treated as odd and bizarre that was happening in some corner, it had a serious disruptive effect. All these people who desperately wanted to be aligned with some line that was clear, suddenly switched over. They were a minority. But that was damaging and that was a split.

TG: I remember Phil Court, who was slightly younger than me, and one of the guys in REM, just one day flippantly but accurately describing secular religious thinking: "follow me and you need never think again." And I hardwired that on the spot. Because what Arthur is talking about is the need people have to belong, for leadership, for clarity. "Follow me and we're right" — and it doesn't work.

AD: He's now a Presbyterian minister! After the Albanians, you then had Bob Avakian in America of the Revolutionary Communist Party USA (RCPUSA). He was the great leader of the American proletariat. Again it was clear that it was a cult phenomena; we weren't unfamiliar with Leftist cults and things, and at the same time a lot of what the RCPUSA said coincided with views that we held.

RM: Did you communicate with them at all?

AD: Not really. One section. REM split again with people going over towards the RCPUSA, and I can remember writing a polemic against something that was said. In America, Russia took Alaska. And they may have to fight to defend it but they'd simultaneously be fighting against their own ruling class. And that was translated here as, "yes, we would support national defense, while continuing the war with the bourgeoisie." I wrote something sarcastic about how we were actually not at war with the bourgeoisie, we're a discussion circle that hasn't got a platoon.

There was a fantasy world. People who are attracted to revolutionary politics are often also fantasists. There's a distinction between genuine attraction to revolutionary politics and the attraction to fantasy. Definitely RCPUSA did have some serious theoretical work, and at the same time there was something clearly off about them. That was a fairly overwhelming phenomena.

My feeling from the 60s to the 70s was that we had a tremendous wave where things seemed normal. I grew up in that wave. It was normal for people's ideas to be developing as rapidly as they were in the late 60s. And then followed this period of stagnation. It took a while to realize that the stagnation was because the social demands of the mass movement had been met, and it was fairly natural for the mass movement to subside. But we were desperately trying to keep something going.

RM: Did that register in the way you were discussing it?

AD: It registered in retrospect. I remember being one of the earliest ones aware of Vietnam. There wasn't that feeling of "we've won." The demonstrations had subsided, the mass movements went away, and the Vietnam War persisted. Because it continued for two years after the Geneva talks. They were withdrawing their troops, the war was ending, but we didn't fully register that. We just saw that we weren't able to mobilize anymore.

RM: What new synthesis did Maoism represent in the development of your theories in the 60s? When you

were reflecting on the 70s, how did you relate things going on in China to the United States and Australia?

AD: Maoism was part of the same worldwide revolution. It was interesting that there was a 60s wave that didn't just hit Western Europe and the U.S., while it hit China and the national liberation movements around the world. Mao's synthesis of it was succinct. To quote a well known phrase: "There may be thousands of principles of Marxism but they can all be boiled down in one sentence: It is right to rebel! For thousands of years they said it's right to repress, it's right to exploit, and it's wrong to rebel. Only with the coming of Marxism was this untruth turned upside down." That was the underlying synthesis. The people who understood it also understood that they need to study more theory. But if you weren't a rebel you certainly weren't going to be attracted to the Maoists. All these people who are fundamentally not rebels are attracted to all kinds of, allegedly, Left politics because they're desperately hostile to capitalism. They think things are not only terrible, but that they're going from bad to worse and you can't win. That's their world outlook. Whereas the Maoist world outlook is, "we are rebels, we are fighters and we are going to win."

TP: Can you expand on how you understand how the phrase "it is right to rebel" encapsulates the essence of Marxism or Marxism-Leninism?

TG: I'll put aside Marxism for a minute, because it seems implicit in Marxism. You look at Gerrard Winstanley from 1650: "Freedom is the man who turneth the world upside down and he therefore maketh many enemies." Or Percy Bysshe Shelley: "Men of England, heirs of glory, writers of unwritten story." The urge from the bottom to rebel. This is not exclusively Marxist; it may not even be predominantly Marxist, but it is certainly Marxist.

AD: Marxism is it. Marxism is a form of rebellion. It's not a religious sect with particular tenets.

TG: That's right. Individuals have to do their own thinking.

DM: It's going to be particularly important after the revolution. Certainly in the experiences of places like the Soviet Union and China before the Cultural Revolution, it was people's job to hail the great leaders and just follow instructions. The whole thing about the Cultural Revolution was that there was still a revolution going on and there were still people to rebel against.

TG: That's a profound cultural question. Seizing power ain't easy, but, compared to the kind of cultural change that is required, seizing power is easy. Changing the way people think, the rules and understandings they live by, especially since many of them are either unconscious or barely conscious, they're in a barely lit corner of our noggins. That is really long-term work.

The Russian and Chinese Revolutions, as important as they were, were wonderfully successful in completing the bourgeois revolutions which the bourgeoisie weren't strong enough to start, let alone carry out. It's not surprising in hindsight that the proletariat leadership fell, because they had to unite with the peasantry; there had to be compromises made. What could possibly go wrong? The revolutions didn't go wrong in the sense that they were successful in prosecuting the bourgeois revolution which needed to occur. It was an advance. But the styles of thinking which will have dominated the people, broadly speaking, will make it exceptionally difficult, almost frightening for people to stand up and rock the boat. I guess that's why Mao and Wang Hongwen made that comment about swimming against the tide being a revolutionary and Marxist principle, even if it involves being jailed or killed. It was serious.

AD: On "it is right to rebel," the quintessence of it is with Marxism, but it is also what's attractive about modernity.

TP: Who are the figures there? When you say that bourgeois epoch is attractive because it is right to rebel, aside from Marx, maybe prior to Marx, who are the figures that phrase represents?

AD: Abraham Lincoln is a positive example leading a second bourgeois revolution in America, but I would take it even earlier. Oliver Cromwell would be the classic example of the puritan, ideological, fundamentalist christian, fanatic, dictator, etc. He was throwing the existing social relations up in the air, but does it resonate with you that that's what Marx was on about?

RM: Yes, but perhaps today there is not a sense of Marx inheriting high bourgeois enlightenment thought.

AD: We are in agreement there, but I wouldn't focus on that as being the dividing line. I would focus on the rebel spirit. That somebody can have a quite backward position, like those going through this reactionary green idiocy. You can have a rebellious spirit and be capable of growing out of idiocy, but you can't have a reactionary spirit and develop towards Marxism. There are personality types that are conservative and rebellious. It's true that one should admire the bourgeois rebellious spirit, but what we actually want is the proletarian rebellious spirit, which is lacking at the moment. We do support bourgeois modernity against these reactionary, feudal relics, but I wouldn't overstress the enthusiasm for the bourgeoisie.

RM: Did you view Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Zedong thought as a response to the change of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, or did you view it as a clarification of Marx?

AD: It was partly a response to the negative side of the Communist International (Comintern) in Stalinism. The Trotskyists have this emphasis on the Maoists being Stalinists, and I'm proud to say, "yes, I'm a Stalinist." We were acutely conscious that the Comintern played a negative role in the Communist Party, as well as a positive role: they wouldn't have survived without Comintern support. The idea that "swimming against the tide" is a Marxist principle was not a concept that the Comintern had established and imprinted in the minds of every communist. It was the concept that Mao and the Maoists were trying to imprint, although the imprinting itself was dodgy. I love that scene in the *Life of Brian* (1979): Brian tells his followers, "you're all individuals; you're all different," and one replies,

"Maoist "in the service of peanut king Carter" Spartacist League debates Albert Langer

The first organised public debate in Australia between leading proponents of Maoism and Trotskyism took place at LaTrobe University on 12 October. Some 75 people came to hear Albert Langer, former leading cadre of the Peking-loyal Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) (CPA(ML)) and now the leading figure in the breakaway Movement for Independence and Socialism (MIS), confront David Grumot, a member of the Spartacist League (SL) Central Committee, on the questions: "What is the Soviet Union? Where is it going?" Was the USSR, as Langer argued, a "capitalist, imperialist state" that should be opposed even through a bloc with NATO; or was it a bureaucratically ruled workers state, necessitating of proletarian revolutionists both conditional military defence against imperialist attack and a perspective of political revolution to restore the soviet democracy of the first six years of the Russian Revolution?

As comrade Grumot noted in his opening remarks, the choice of topic was "entirely appropriate". Attitudes to the Soviet Union have cleaved "a decisive dividing line ... between reform and revolution" within the international workers movement since the October Revolution. And by the conclusion of the two-hour debate and discussion it was clear that, as comrade Grumot put it:

"Langer's position on the Russian question leads directly to being the most abject apologists for counterrevolutionary 'Marxist-Leninist' in the service of that peanut king, Jimmy Carter."

"Honest traitors"

Langer was not always simply a "Marxist" mouthpiece for the anti-Soviet device of US imperialism. Like Grumot, he belonged to that generation of leftist students initially won to revolutionary politics through subjective identification with the anti-imperialist struggle of the Vietnamese masses in the late sixties. But unlike Grumot, Langer -- the most prominent Maoist student leader during the heyday of the New Left -- willingly subordinated his subjective desire to smash imperialist capitalism to the dictates of Peking's counterrevolutionary foreign policy. Grumot broke with Maoism over such issues as Peking's wholehearted support for the Ceylonese Bandaranaike regime's massacre of the Maoist/Gaavarist-inspired JVP youth uprising in 1971 and went on to join the Trotskyist SL in 1974. At the time of the JVP rebellion, the CPA(ML) paper *Vanguard* had reprinted an article from the LaTrobe Maoist paper, *Red Host*, by Grumot, then a member of the LaTrobe Worker Student Alliance and the pseudo-clandestine CPA(ML) youth group, the Young Communist League, praising the JVP -- only to issue a cringing "self-criticism" weeks later as Peking's role became clear. Only after Mao's successors had a falling out did Langer split from the CPA(ML), proclaiming his allegiance to the deposed "Gang of Four".

For five years the SL has been the only tendency in the Australian left to provide a coherent Marxist analysis of the political bankruptcy of Maoism. The choice of venue was fitting: the CPA(ML) front group (Students for Australian

Independence) at LaTrobe University, once a Maoist stronghold, has been reduced to a "discredited, isolated band of ocker nationalists, their increasingly blatant counterrevolutionary politics subjected to relentless exposure by the young Spartacist Club."

The CPA(ML) seized on this debate with "Trotskyites" -- in fact with a "person who betrayed [sic] the Worker Student Alliance to join the lunatic Trotskyite fringe, the Spartacist League" (*Vanguard*, 12 October) -- to demonstrate anew Langer's renegacy, and to bestow on the SL a rather unprecedented if backhanded compliment regarding our opposition to Australian nationalism:

"At least the Spartacist League, with their slogan 'Defend the Soviet Union' and their open opposition to Australian independence [i] are honest traitors. The super-revolutionaries [Langer] are dishonest. They are traitors pure and simple."

The self-styled "Libertarian Socialist" anarchists at LaTrobe broke precedent by taking time out from the day-to-day apolitical antics involved in running the SAC to issue a politically serious three-page leaflet as well as intervene in the debate discussion. The reformists of the Communist Party (CPA) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), on the other hand, tried hard to "ignore" the debate, conspicuously so.

After accepting paid advertisements, both the CPA's *Triumph* and the SWP's *Direct Action* felt compelled to hold meetings of their leading editorial bodies in order to renge. The only SWP'er at the debate was incapable of uttering so much as a word in defence of the SWP's claim to Trotskyism. And Langer's own MIS, as this "Marxist-Leninist" was quick to avow to the audience, had nothing to do with the debate. The chairman announced: "David, of course, is speaking on behalf of the Spartacist League, and Albert is apparently speaking on behalf of Albert!"

Langer vs Marx, Lenin
In his presentation comrade Grumot debunked the Maoist theory that capitalism had been peacefully restored in the Soviet Union -- a process Langer holds is now underway in China -- also simply because Khrushchev's rise to power put "bad ideas" in command. Calling this "subjective idealism run amok", a repudiation of the Marxist understanding that an overturn of property relations necessitated the violent smashing up of the state, Grumot said: "It is ludicrous to believe that Khrushchev's speech and the sending of Ilolotov to the provinces ... amounted to the smashing of the Soviet state!"

Ideology and politics do play an important determining role in the development of a workers state, but they are not a substitute for material forces. The Stalin/Bukharin leadership's concessions to the kulaks in the mid-twenties -- part of the reactionary policy of building



"socialism in one country" -- paved the way for the 1928-29 kulak food boycott which posed a direct restorationist threat. But for that threat to be translated into a successful overturn of the proletarian dictatorship would have required an armed showdown and a massive social convulsion -- a civil war -- which Stalin headed off only through a ruthless physical liquidation of the kulaks.

Then as now the reactionary policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy pose the greatest single danger to the continued existence of the workers states. But had the left Opposition to Stalin won out in the 1920s, opening the road to the proletarian triumph of socialism, today there might well be no bureaucratic usurpers -- and no Maoists to label them "fascist".

Unhappily, Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Thermidor -- the consolidation of a counterrevolutionary bureaucratic curle in 1924 -- has withstood the test of history. Langer's arguments offered neither a coherent -- much less a Marxist -- analysis nor a revolutionary strategy deriving from it. Nor could they. As the SL speaker pointed out, the Maoist "analysis" is "a dogma, a myth", quoted by the Peking bureaucracy to justify its unlovely alliance with the most reactionary forces in the world -- NATO, the despised shah of Iran, racist South Africa, even the neo-fascist Ustasha -- against its Moscow rivals.

Marx defined capitalism to be predicated upon the individual ownership and competition of conflicting capitals and socialism to be a society based on the elimination of scarcity and all class distinctions. For Langer socialism is a period of "fierce and protracted struggle" and "the bourgeoisie is a [classless] socialist society is to be found right inside the Communist Party [the vanguard of the proletariat]!". For Langer capitalism is the private ownership of the means of production but by the existence of wage labour and commodity production, which Marx pointed out in his "Critique of the Gotha Program" were characteristics even of the lower phase of genuine, classless communist society! Having agreed that capitalism required a labour reserve of unemployed where none existed in the Soviet Union, Langer went on to assert that a chronic labour shortage also "implies the anarchy of capitalism". One impatient listener finally blurted out, "That's not, Albert!"

An SL speaker from the floor attacked such wilful redefinitions of basic Marxist terms: "Bourgeoisie in the CP? Well, the bourgeoisie means something in Marxist terms. They're people who play a necessary economic role ... not just people with 'bad ideas'... they own capital..."

Langer could only retort that defining "capitalist as someone who owns capital is circular!" For revolutionaries precise terminology and materialist theory are necessary to determine a

Continued on page seven

"I'm not." We would be hammering into people that swimming against the tide is a Marxist principle: "why aren't you swimming?!"

TG: It's an inherent contradiction, because if someone stood against the tide they would automatically be swimming with the tide.

DM: I'm particularly interested in how, just after the revolution, there will be people who will need to begin the whole revolution from below. They'll keep on learning. While there is another stratum of people, sleazy people running stuff, and they'll be scheming and pretending to be friends. There will also be people who have strange social pathologies — psychopaths and sociopaths everywhere. People will need incredible moral courage to stand up against, rebel against, or resist a lot of shit. That was a big experience in the Cultural Revolution. It won't be the same. It will be under better conditions in a more modern capitalist society, but it's going to be a new way of thinking, behaving, and transforming their relations.

RM: In 1978, Arthur debated the Spartacist league at Monash University. In their written review of the debate, they quote you as saying, "If you had a revolution in Australia tomorrow, the social system wouldn't have fundamentally changed the day after tomorrow. You'd go back to work the next day and you'd find that you'd probably have the same bosses."⁸ Can you expand on what you meant?

AD: To which they reply, yes, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, the class struggle continues, with one rather enormous difference that workers then have state power and can subject the masses to their will. The Spartacists' consensus of responding to that is to denounce you: that you have not realized the suppression by state power would solve the problem. The working class has state power. If it were some comrade who was part of the struggle, you would explain that it was a Stalinist error, which was from this failure in Russia, that the basic point was that the working classes *got state power* and they got to suppress the enemies with state power, and they didn't realize the need for the fundamental revolutionary upheavals like what China was trying to do with the Cultural Revolution.

RM: Red Eureka has held an explicitly pro-NATO position, in contrast to almost all of the established far Left in Australia well before the war in Ukraine. What made you come to this position, and how has it changed, if at all, during the last 50 years?

DM: We're not pro-NATO, we just want NATO to do things. We want it to get in there and do bloody more to help Ukraine. In the second World War, the Americans and the British were fighting fascism. Trotskysts had trouble with that, but most of the rest of the human race had no trouble with the idea that we were all fighting against fascism. We shouldn't have any trouble with the idea of getting together to ensure that Ukraine wins, and that the regime in Russia collapses. It is the natural thing to do. Some people have weird theoretical notions running around in their head, making them think otherwise.

AD: You could be a wishy-washy pacifist, opposing some wars that should be opposed, but you cannot be far Left and be against going to war against fascism.

DM: The Ukrainians desperately want to become Europeans, and join with everybody else.

RM: I've read some of your writings about fascism, David,⁹ especially today, to say various states are fascists, their leaders are fascists, how do we understand that category today? Most people on the Left are confused; they say, for example, that Reagan was fascist, and some said Bill Clinton was a fascist.

TG: "Fascism" has come to mean whatever you want. If you listen to the rulers and their mouthpieces in China and Russia, they are against democracy. They don't like democracy; they are rabidly nationalistic; and they think the West is decadent.

AD: We should confess: there was a trend, in the 60s Left, of calling everything fascist, of which we would've been guilty. Neither Reagan nor Nixon was a fascist, but one is entitled to denounce their fascist policies. Nixon was killing people with fascist policies. There is a distinction between the sort of fascism of the Chinese regime, against that of the classic Italian and German fascism, but what they do have in common is that they were mass movements. Even the Chinese regime tries to mobilize the people as the German and Italian fascists did. Putin's regime, on the other hand, has been demobilizing people. The basic principle of all the fascist governments is Georgi Dimitrov's classic definition of fascism: "the terroristic dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."¹⁰

HH: While the USSR existed, you categorized it as social imperialism. What did social imperialism mean to you back then, and how did you view the collapse of the USSR post-1991?

AD: We moved on from social imperialism to social fascism, and from there to fascism. The USSR was fascist long before its end and the Putin regime. China was definitely the source of that. It wasn't an independent analysis, but it was one that we had to think about because it was completely foreign to what the whole of the hard Left, both Maoists and other groups, were completely focused on U.S. imperialism. It was startling for the Chinese to suddenly be raising the question that USSR imperialism was just as dangerous, and we had to study if they were right, because we weren't going to swing with the tide. The Trotskysists wouldn't have let us get away with not thinking about it, because they were hammering us continuously about echoing the Chinese. So we did think about it. The USSR was clearly threatening nuclear war against China. It was no longer a problem that they were saying, "fight U.S. imperialism," but that they were invading other countries for conquest.

RM: That leads us to the topic of imperialism in general. It is one of these words, like fascism, that the Left uses to describe anything. You've used it less analytically in the past. How do you think of it as forming a part of your theory and analysis?

AD: When the Vietnam War was on, anti-imperialism was promoted as the explanation for how the world

works: U.S. imperialism is the number one enemy of the peoples of the world; the national liberation movements were fighting it. That was a crude, but roughly reasonable description of the central issue in politics. Just as during the second world war, the central struggle was understood as being against fascism. That got turned into, "we're all an anti-imperialist movement," "everything is a reflection of imperialism," etc. It would be hard to disentangle where we got off that trajectory. I would've got off it by now to the point of being practically pro-imperialist! I can't stand this pseudo-Leftist, anti-imperialist posturing.

TG: They say that imperialism did this or that, and it has become this mysterious object — the great Satan. It doesn't matter what everybody else does, including the Russians; it will still be the Americans who are behind it — that American imperialism is the problem. There is still an anti-West tendency that can get twisted and perverse, morphing into anti-modernism, anti-global society.

AD: There is a general thrust against modernity and the West. The connection is, these people who you call Marxist, and nearly all the Left, think like this. You are describing a bunch of reactionaries. Their actual political position is not even mildly progressive. They are against modern society, which does mean they are against capitalism, because the modern society is capitalist. They want to go backwards. There's lots of progressive people around; they are the Left in the abstract sense: people who are both on the side of the oppressed and in favor of progress. Many such people are not organized politically, would not dream of getting involved in any of these hard Left groups, and clearly have nothing in common with them. Why do you keep referring to them as the Left, let alone Marxists?

RM: What I'm saying is, that's the Marxism we have today.

AD: It's not!

DM: There's a whole lot of these Marxians and Marxists, academics, who have been an important factor in turning Marxism into mush. The people who say the working class is dead, the revolution is dead, but we have to rescue something from Marx.

AD: There is a slightly contradictory thing: there is some valuable role for people who can speak German and understand 19th-century German Idealist philosophy, and doing academic studies. I've seen articles by them which are of some value in an academic sense. But the idea that there would be a Marxist tradition passed on by the Marxists, Marxian academics is bizarre in itself.

TB: Marxism is dead, andso it does get passed on that way.

RM: Tom Griffith, you participated in our "Marxism and anarchism" panel in 2022, where you said,

both the Russian and Chinese revolutions were remarkably successful in completing the bourgeois revolution. They fell short of promoting the proletarian revolution. My hunch here is that for the proletarian revolution to be realistic to occur, to be successful, modernity, the bourgeois revolution, the bourgeoisification of society needs to be utterly complete which doesn't mean finished because things always tend to develop. But the feudal ideas, the traditional ideas, they can be pre-feudal, they can be tribal, can adjust themselves up or can be interpreted as things that look remarkably necessary, almost modern or revolutionary, no thanks.¹¹

To even claim that the bourgeoisification of society should be completed — this would not only be rejected by most of the Marxists today as being Eurocentric, but there's a kernel there. This motivated my other questions. Where did you learn of this bourgeoisification of society and think in this way, and could you maybe expand on it?

TG: The key thinker that has helped me here is Marshall Berman. Berman was an American academic in New York of Jewish heritage. Here is an example of what I find attractive in Berman: in his centenary of Times Square he mentions a chat with a mate, and they're talking about Times Square, thinking about American capitalism: at Times Square you can be yourself and someone else at the same time. In other words, it's the dynamism; it's transformative, and without that we're nothing. People seek transformation. The work I do with refugee communities and people who have been traumatized, is compelling in this regard. People don't want to be fucking stuck. People, women, especially from Africa and Sudan, don't want to be stuck. They want transformation; they can't necessarily articulate it in that way, but that doesn't matter. People want transformation and it's the dynamism that is implied in capitalism. And Richard Wright, when he fled the Jim Crow South, described himself being picked up by the burning arms of the city, and he wasn't joking, it was burnt, but he grew.¹² Unless revolutionaries understand and embrace that dynamic, we're fraught. We can have disagreements over all sorts of things, but if you don't understand and embrace that dynamic, please retire.

DM: That is perhaps where that reactionary character comes in: the idealization of getting out of the city, returning to farm life.

DP: In an article you authored on *Online Opinion*, David, you write that a genuine Left would align itself with the neo-conservatives and support their re-emergence.¹³ They stand for an activist foreign policy of regime change, nation building, and economic development. This is reminiscent of Christopher Hitchens's political turn from Trotskyist to neo-conservative, only that, unlike Hitchen, you do not identify with neo-conservatism. Why is this such an unusual position among the Left, and why should a genuine Left support it?

DM: It's about regime change, and it got fucked up by Obama. Iraq became the only Arab country in that area with an elected government and civil society as a result of getting rid of one of the most barbarous regimes on the planet.

TG: It's even more barbarous than the similarly named regime in Syria.

DM: It was an exceptionally fascist regime, and toxic militarily. It was a threat to everybody. Obama failed to stay on the cause, and within five minutes you had ISIS.

TB: He didn't support the Arab Spring.

DM: The problem was not following through on the neo-conservative position. The neo-conservatives lost their influence fairly quickly. The Americans decided for their own reasons that getting rid of Saddam Hussein was a good thing to do. They had the concept of regime change, which makes sense, depending on conditions. There are lots of cases where we are not in a position to do that. But this was a case where it made sense and had a positive outcome with an elected government. It could've led to something similar in Syria.

TG: The appalling situation in Syria was that when the Ba'athists had deployed chemical weapons, and the Americans said, you fucking do that, and you're in deep shit, but then the U.S. did nothing. Russia saw, and you can't blame Russia but they stepped into a vacuum. Regarding the Arab Spring and the Americans and the neo-conservatives, people think that if the motivations are not pure, they must therefore be bad. Now the motivations may be bad, but the results may be good. We are not after fucking saints. We're atheists; we make the gods. For Christ's sake, why would we need a god that would invade Iraq?

TB: We just want the outcome.

AD: Fundamentally the people who are regarded as the Left and even as being Marxists, intend to be counter-revolutionary scum. It's not a problem of an inadequate grasp of Marxism. They are rabidly hostile to progress. There are other people who are quite conservative and yet more progressive than they are.

TG: Although they can spin all sorts of weird theories together to explain why America is the main problem, and we should embrace all sorts of garbage.

TB: It's easier to oppose than to support things. Thus the anti-imperialism and the anti-capitalism, which is really an excuse to whine, complain, and say we are opposed to them. What's difficult is to come up with a program, an alternative — and we support this. **|P**

¹ Regarding Arthur Dent, see also Rjurik Davidson, Arthur Dent, and Rory Dufficy, "What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?," *Platypus Review* 139 (September 2021), <https://platypus1917.org/2021/09/01/what-is-capitalism-and-why-should-we-be-against-it-2/>; Andy Blunden, Arthur Dent, and Alison Thorn, "The legacy of 1968" and Barry York's response, *Platypus Review* 165 (April 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/category/pr/issue-165/>.

² Regarding Tom Griffiths, see also Matthew Crossin, Tom Griffiths, Lachlan Marshall, and Benjamin Smith, "Marxism and anarchism: Radical ideologies today," *Platypus Review* 154 (March 2023), <https://platypus1917.org/2023/03/01/marxism-and-anarchism-radical-ideologies-today/>.

³ Regarding David McMullen, see also David McMullen, "A Maoist response to 'What was the Chinese Revolution and where is it going?,'" *Platypus Review* 147 (June 2022), <https://platypus1917.org/2022/05/31/a-maoist-response-to-what-was-the-chinese-revolution-and-where-is-it-going/>; Verity Burgmann, Kevin Healy, David McMullen, and Max Ogden, "The Australian Labor Party and the Left," *Platypus Review* 148 (July–August 2022), <https://platypus1917.org/2022/07/03/the-australian-labor-party-and-the-left/>; Conrad Hamilton, Griffith Jones, David McMullen, and Anthony Monteiro, "China and the Left," *Platypus Review* 162 (December 2023 – January 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2023/12/01/china-and-the-left/>; and David McMullen, "Ecosocialism and degrowth are great ways to become irrelevant," *Platypus Review* 167 (June 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/06/02/ecosocialism-and-degrowth-are-great-ways-to-become-irrelevant/>.

⁴ CPA (ML) split from the Communist Party of Australia in 1964 after the Sino-Soviet split.

⁵ One of the four "generals," mentioned in Mao Tse-tung, "Dialogues with Responsible Persons of Capital Red Guards Congress" (July 28, 1968), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_81.htm>.

⁶ In 1854 Victorian miners built a stockade near the Eureka mine in protest against the colonial government's mining license fees. The struggle of these miners came to be considered by many a highpoint in Australian political history.

⁷ "Editorial," *Discussion Bulletin* 3 (March 17, 1979), <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/australia/db-3.pdf>.

⁸ "Maoist 'in the service of peanut king Carter': Spartacist League debates Albert Langer," *Australasian Spartacist* 59 (November 1978): 4, 7, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/icl-spartacists/periodicals/australasian/059_November_1978_Austral_Spart.pdf>.

⁹ See, for example, McMullen's opening remarks in Hamilton, Jones, McMullen, and Monteiro, "China and the Left."

¹⁰ Georgi Dimitrov, "The Fascist Offensive and the Task of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism" (1935), in Georgi Dimitrov, *Selected Works*, vol. 2 (Sofa: Sofia Press, 1972), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm>.

¹¹ Crossin, Griffiths, Marshall, Smith, "Marxism and anarchism."

¹² Tom Griffiths expands on Richard Wright in his article "'Follow me and you need never think again': Richard Wright, Liu Shao-Chi, Julius Fucik, the CPA(ML)... and the fire we need," *C21st Left* (March 11, 2021), <https://c21stleft.com/2021/03/11/follow-me-and-you-need-never-think-again-richard-wright-liu-shao-chi-julius-fucik-the-cpaml-and-the-fire-we-need/>.

¹³ David McMullen, "A genuine left would support Western Civilisation," *Online Opinion* (Jun 1, 2018), <https://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=19769>.

"Towards the abyss," continued from page 2

of hegemony and counter-hegemony in the current period. The ideologies are weak; the intellectuals are weak; the labor unions are weak. This is a much bigger problem than the absence of a vanguard party.

DLJ: There's a weaker civil society.

VI: Yes, but when the revolution happens, it only reproduces this disconnection between the society and its supposed political representatives. This is the reproduction of the crisis of political representation. Contemporary revolutions are a response to the crisis of political representation. That's why the people go to the streets, and call on the incumbent leader to leave, because often it is a president who has served for two, three, four terms. Think about the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, who is serving a sixth term right now, which the failed uprising in 2020 tried to prevent. People do not see their true representatives in politics. The revolution happens and reproduces this gap, because the groups in politics and civil society who exploit the political opportunity to push forward their interests and agendas, do not represent the majority of the population or even of the majority of those who participate in the revolution. Consider the neoliberal reforms pushed forward by the Ukrainian NGOs; or the nationalist agenda pushed forward by the far Right minority who participated in the Euromaidan; or the oligarchic interests and how Poroshenko acquired more wealth after the Euromaidan. That's why these contemporary revolutions reproduce the very crisis responsible for them. They may even intensify the crisis because they inflate the post-revolutionary expectations, while weakening the state in order to meet them.

DLJ: What accounts for this ideological weakness? You said that the new Left emerged from the outcome of the Orange Revolution, and then again, a very similar situation happened in the Euromaidan with Poroshenko; from one oligarch to another. Things happen, and people reach for something out of the history of the Left to try to explain what's happening, and the problem is reproduced again.

VI: Many claim that we are living in the period of the end of ideology. Big narratives don't work anymore. But it's not the end of ideology, because we do have ideologists. The question is primarily about their connection with the masses, their capacity to link their ideological constructions with some significant groups of people. This is explained not simply by the weakness of their theoretical lines, but on the social level, about how contemporary civil society is changing. Why are people more triggered by identities? That's why we are talking about identity politics. about *who you are* and not which society you stand for exactly. There is some social structural factor that stands behind this disconnection between intellectuals with their theories, programs, and projects and the classes, whose interests they are supposed to represent. **|P**

¹ (New York: Verso, 2024).

² [Russian] Restructuring. This term was used in a political reform movement within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

³ Here "new Left" should not be confused with the New Left of the mid-20th century. The lowercase "new" will be used to differentiate it. See Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Left divergence, Right convergence: Anarchists, Marxists, and nationalist polarization in the Ukrainian conflict, 2013–2014," *Globalizations* 17, no. 5 (2020): 820–39, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/volodymyr-ishchenko-left-divergence-right-convergence>.

⁴ The Party of Regions (Partiia rehioniv) was formed in 1997 and was banned in 2023 by the Eighth Administrative Court of Appeal. It has not competed in elections since 2014.

⁵ Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Ukraine," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Left Parties in Europe*, eds., Fabien Escalona, et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 665–92.

⁶ See Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Class or regional cleavage? The Russian invasion and Ukraine's 'East/West' divide," *European Societies* (November 6, 2023): 1–26, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/375423575_Class_or_regional_cleavage_The_Russian_invasion_and_Ukraine's_'EastWest'_divide>. On "22 Ukraines," Ishchenko cites Yaroslav Hrytsak, "Dvadsiat divi Ukrainy," *Krytyka* 54 (2002): 3–6.

⁷ The Soviet-era Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU (USSR)) was banned in 1991. The more recent Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) was founded in 1993, claiming to be the successor of the KPU (USSR), when it split from the Socialist Party of Ukraine, which had been founded in 1991. In 2015, the KPU was suspended, in part due to laws banning Soviet communist symbols. The KPU was permanently banned in 2022 together with over a dozen supposedly "pro-Russian" Ukrainian parties.

⁸ Youth organization of the USSR, also known as the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League. The Komsomol was the final stage (ages 14–28) of the youth organization; the preceding stages being the Young Pioneers (ages 8–15) and the Little Octobrists (ages 7–9).

⁹ Orhanizatsiia ukrainskykh natsionalistiv, founded in 1929 in Vienna.

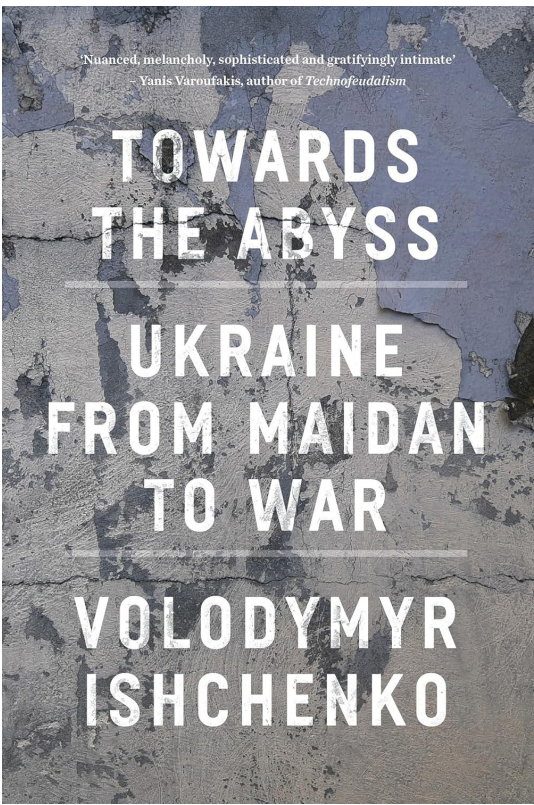
¹⁰ Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Behind Russia's War Is Thirty Years of Post-Soviet Class Conflict," *Jacobin*, October 3, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/10/russia-ukraine-war-explanation-class-conflict>.

¹¹ Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Ukrainian protesters must make a decisive break with the far right," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/07/ukrainian-protesters-break-with-far-right>.

¹² Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii, founded in 1993.

¹³ Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

¹⁴ Current Chancellor of Germany and member of the SPD.



Cover of Ishchenko, *Towards the Abyss*

but they couldn’t mobilize the people to defend them (which was needed in 2014, for example). On the other hand, even though the Western camp often did not have popular support for nationalist and neoliberal reforms, they could push forward their agenda and a better capacity to legitimize their particular class interests as national, in particular, in front of the Western publics. After 2022, we’ve seen this phenomenon as “Ukrainian voices” — a narrow group of people, mostly from the middle class, supposedly speaking on behalf of the whole nation.

This explanation of the political cleavage leads to an understanding of what was the issue with the “new Left” and the “old Left.” The “old Left” here refers to the successor parties of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, primarily to the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU).⁷ In the 1990s, the KPU was the most popular party in post-Soviet Ukraine, together with other Communist-successor, Left-wing parties. They were capable of controlling the majorities in the parliament, to block some of the initiatives of the Right-wing governments. The KPU could claim over 100,000 card-holding members — they kept rigorous notes about that. Even on the eve of the Euromaidan, they won 13% of the national vote in 2012. After the Euromaidan, they were first to be banned. They couldn’t participate in the elections since 2015 because of the decommunization laws. The symbols and the major elements of the ideologies were also banned. The Party declined to change and adapt, but it was also not capable of fighting for itself. They lost the most militant organizations, for example, in Donbass and Crimea because of the war and the annexation of Crimea by Russia (2014). More younger members, with less commitment to the Party, left the organization than the older members, who had joined during the Soviet Union. These older members had spent almost all of their lives in the Party and affiliated organizations — starting from school, from the Komsomol.⁸

There is also the new Left that has come about. Basically, they merged with the pretty small, Left-liberal wing of pro-Western, middle-class civil society. They were interested in culturally progressive topics or some mildly redistributionist policies that EU integration could bring to Ukraine, e.g., more progressive taxation. But that milieu has not had strong interest in anti-capitalist topics and the question of social revolution. Basically, that old Left / new Left divide reproduced this class conflict standing behind the so-called regional cleavage in Ukraine.

DLJ: In your article, “Left Divergence, Right Convergence,” you talk about how the Left appeared on both sides of the Euromaidan. In Platypus, we are interested in how the Left justifies itself through the history of the Left, e.g., through anti-imperialism or the right of self-determination. During the Euromaidan, some people reached for anarchism and others reached for Marxism-Leninism. Can you talk about how the different parts of the Left ideologically justified themselves during that period?

VI: The KPU was at first sympathetic to the Euromaidan. They said that people came to the Maidan Square because of real, social problems, but the oligarchic clans and the West instrumentalized the popular protest. That was the KPU’s rhetoric in the first weeks of Euromaidan. What changed was the activity of the far-Right groups in Euromaidan, who took more and more initiative in the protest. The trigger for the Communists was the dismantling of Lenin’s monument in Kyiv by Euromaidan protesters. That was led by far-Right militants, and it became evident that the movement was starting to take a clearly anti-communist dimension. Even before that there were Russophobic slogans during the Euromaidan. The main greeting, “Glory to Ukraine, glory to the heroes,” which became mainstream in Ukraine, came from the far-Right subculture, which directly took it from the greetings of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.⁹ This organization was close to the fascist family of movements and parties in the 1930s. This symbolism, which was pushed forward by a far-Right minority, was accepted by the majority, but was obviously repulsive to the communists. There were also violent attacks even on the Leftists who were trying to join the protests. When the government decided to pass a series of laws that significantly limited the protest activity — they were called “dictatorship laws,” although they were still pretty far from a dictatorship — this was a sign that the government was trying to repress the movement. The Communists voted for those laws with the ruling party. When Maidan won and overthrew Yanukovych, the Communists perceived it as fascist, anti-communist, pro-imperialist coup.

In the spring of 2014, the KPU harshly criticized the Euromaidan and the new government as a fascist junta. But they did not act against this government as the communists were supposed to act against a fascist junta. There was a huge gap between the

words and the deeds of the Communist leadership. The KPU has had the same leader since 1993, Petro Symonenko. The leader has become integrated into the political elite, and behaved opportunistically. Symonenko was thinking primarily of keeping his position and his property. The reaction of some of the local organizations, especially in Donbass or in Crimea, were different. Many actively supported the Anti-Maidan protests. Some supported pro-Russian separatists and established the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics. But the KPU leadership expelled those organizations that acted against the Ukraine government. There was a crazy divergence between what the Communist leadership was claiming and what they were doing, because it was not leading to any serious strategy.

The organizations which were younger and involved some of the former communists, tried to build themselves as a radical alternative to the KPU, in the same political niche. This was the case of the Borotba (“Struggle”) organization. During the Euromaidan, some of their activists even tried to come to the protesters to have labor-union agitations. They were beaten by the far-Right activists among the Euromaidan protesters. Borotba originally took a kind of non-campist position. Not supporting the Euromaidan but also not supporting the government. That was their difference with the KPU. Borotba condemned the KPU for voting for the “dictatorship laws.” Borotba also said that the country might get into civil war, because of the Euromaidan. When the Euromaidan won, Borotba started to support the Donbass separatist revolt. The organization in most of Ukraine stopped its public activity because some activists emigrated, or some went underground. Some personally joined the Donbass separatists. Some eventually joined the pro-Ukrainian Left.

Then there was the pro-Euromaidan part of the Left that was more anarchist and Left-liberal. There were not so many Marxists in that milieu, mainly of the post-Trotskyist type. This was an amorphous milieu of pretty small groups, informal networks than organizations. Why did they support the Euromaidan? Not many people among them supported it for some positive agenda, because the positive agenda of Euromaidan was vague. Like in many of the contemporary revolutions, it was a protest against the incumbent leader of the country, not for any clear positive agenda. Beyond that, you saw a huge variety and diversity of views about what a revolution is supposed to be. That’s a big difference compared with the revolutions of the past, which had more articulated programs behind them, or at least had organizations that could articulate that program and that would mobilize and organize the masses. The pro-Maidan new Left was trying to bring into the protest their interpretation that Europe is not just neoliberal, but also about human rights, gender equality, and progressive taxation. That was the initial articulation in the very first days of the protest when it was still peaceful.

With the radicalization of the protest, the far Right was becoming increasingly prominent. The pro-Maidan Left was radicalizing together with the protesters against the police violence and authoritarian tendencies, despite the growing visibility of the far Right. The other part of the Left which didn’t support the Euromaidan, felt that the protest was becoming even more explicitly anti-communist and nationalist, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the country. That divergence of the Left was mostly because of the difference in the perception of the threats, depending on the camp in the Ukrainian politics they felt aligned to: the “Western” or the “Eastern.” The following events demonstrated that the way Euromaidan events unfolded presented an existential threat to the former, the latter, and also to the respective Left.

DLJ: How did the phrases “anti-imperialism” and “anti-fascism” show up in the Euromaidan and since then? It seems like they were used by both sides. Would both sides say they were fighting fascism and imperialism? Is it Russian imperialism or is it NATO / Western imperialism?

VI: Empirically, the anti-imperialist and anti-fascist rhetorical frames were stronger on the anti-Maidan side. They were anti-imperialist because they believed that the Euromaidan was promoting imperialist, Western interests. They were anti-fascist because they were concerned with the threat from the far-Right that became stronger in Euromaidan. The pro-Euromaidan Left at that moment, when Russia annexed Crimea and were supporting the Donbass separatists, began to speak about “Russian imperialism,” although that analysis of imperialism remained weak and underdeveloped. Same for the use of “fascism” in relation to contemporary Russia.

What exactly do we call imperialism? Is it simply another way to say that Russia is an aggressor, that Russia is attacking a smaller neighbor, or is there an actual conceptual depth in that notion of imperialism? At least for Marxism, imperialism is not simply the way to describe all the wrong that a bigger state conducts against a smaller state. Why and how is it connected to the capitalist dynamics and the interests of the ruling classes? That analysis has been missing on that part of the Left.

DLJ: You have an article in *Jacobin* from October 2022, where you say that people just jump on these terms, e.g., “self-determination” and “civilizational choice.”¹⁰ This goes back to the question of the Left here, and the absence of a program, which is that historically the theory of fascism and the theory of imperialism were about how to overcome the problem, whereas now they seem to be ways of justifying supporting one side or the other, or framing things in a certain way.

You wrote an article in *The Guardian* in February 2014 about the need to break from the Right.¹¹ How have your thoughts about the situation changed over the last decade? How has the analysis of the situation changed?

VI: During the first days of the Euromaidan, I had the feeling that everything was developing from bad to worse. The protests started immediately raising divisive issues. Then the government repressed the mobilization on November 30, 2013. I remember

waking up to it — it was a Saturday. Nothing like this had happened in post-Soviet Ukraine before. That’s an important thing to recall because Ukraine is now the site of the biggest war in Europe since WWII, certainly the biggest war of the 21st century so far. Before 2014, Ukraine was a peaceful country. In countries, for example, like the U.S. or France, where significant violence typically happens during the mass protests, you have a history of riots, violent mobilizations, and brutal repression. That’s a part of the repertoire of popular protest and of the coercive apparatus. In Ukraine, there have been no events of significant mass violence since perhaps the 1950s, when the last remnants of the nationalist underground were finally repressed by the Soviet KGB. We had the peaceful revolutions in 1990 and 2004 without any major violence. From the contemporary situation, there were marginal events of violence in between that now would not be of concern, e.g., a 2001 protest I participated in, which was one of the anti-government protests against president Leonid Kuchma. That escalated into riots where a few hundred people were injured. But that was one event in a couple of decades. Many people felt the November 2013 camp was going to disappear by itself because it just didn’t have any prospect, but then the government did this stupid thing and escalated it to become much bigger, radicalizing the protests. Laws limited the protest activity, and the far-Right responded with an escalation of street fights in the center of Kyiv. Firearms were used, and the first people died. Dozens of people were killed in the last days of Euromaidan. Then there was the annexation of Crimea, the Donbass war, and now the full-scale war.

This has been an unraveling radicalization spiral. In February 2014, there were already enough reasons to feel that something dangerous was happening. At the same time, there was a hope that it might stop if the people in the Euromaidan with the people in the anti-Euromaidan camp could be connected — specifically the pro-Maidan Left and the anti-Maidan Left, precisely because they were actively cooperating before the Euromaidan. They were part of the same broad milieu, going to the same rallies, and attending each other’s birthday parties. At some moment, some of them started shooting at each other. I believed that the catastrophic escalation could be stopped. Later, I supported the Minsk Accords, because that was a real chance to find some solution to the war. I supported anything that I thought could prevent the war. It didn’t work. There wasn’t anything flawed in supporting the initiatives that could become an alternative and show some exit from this escalation.

DLJ: I was at Occupy, and I was an American Leftist. From the American perspective, one sees the Euromaidan and chooses sides for something that you don’t know about. If you are a more Left-leaning liberal, you decide you are on the side of the pro-Euromaidan; or if you’re more of Marxist-Leninist, you decide that you’re on the side of the Donbass People’s Republics. Everything is framed for you in a certain way. Do you feel that the international Left let down the Ukrainian Left?

VI: It’s much more complicated because there are pro-Ukrainian Trotskyists. The European mainstream social democratic parties are pro-Ukraine. The Greens are pro-Ukraine. We don’t think of them as the radical Left, but they can be assigned to the broader Left. Even the orthodox communist parties are divided. One part of them supports the Russian Communist Party.¹² The KPU supported the 2022 invasion as an anti-fascist operation. But the other part of the orthodox communists, including such significant parties as the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), the Communist Party of Turkey, and the Communist Party of Spain did not support the invasion and took a line against both sides. There was nothing automatic in how those positions were taken. “Knee-jerk reactions” is a misleading way to primitivize the actual debate on the Left. Some anarchist groups are skeptical about Ukraine because of the prominence of the far-Right and because of their skepticism towards any kind of nationalism. These anarchists lean towards a neutral position. It does not exactly go along the traditional lines of a divide within the Left, and that’s an interesting question to investigate — how the Left chooses sides in this conflict. Ideology might not be the most important factor, because in the case of the big Left parties, it has more to do with their involvement in *Realpolitik* and in coalition governments. Consider the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD).¹³ There is also a significant divergence within those big parties, between the leadership and between the local organizations. Olaf Scholz¹⁴ could be rhetorically pro-Ukrainian, but the local Social Democrats could be more skeptical about full support for sending arms to Ukraine.

DLJ: Of course, ideology probably matters for the groups that don’t have any power. It’s how they justify themselves. It’s kind of a joke: half of the Q&A at any Left event is, “do you support this or that group?” That’s how people decide what organization to join, at least in the U.S.

You mentioned three revolutions: the Revolution on Granite (1990), the Orange Revolution (2004), and the Euromaidan (2013–14). Could you talk about how you feel like the question of revolution was used by bureaucrats and oligarchs to consolidate rule? You’ve mentioned Mark Beissinger in some of your writings. Maybe you can talk about how these revolutions have been resources for passing certain reforms and transparency — in wartime situations, it becomes a justification for all sorts of suppression. How have these revolutions been used to restructure capital and the political sphere?

VI: There is an emerging field of study — contemporary revolutions — because of the increasing understanding that contemporary revolutions are very different from the classical social revolutions. Mark Beissinger, a great American political scientist, has recently published the important book *The Revolutionary City* (2022), in which he did rigorous statistical analysis of all revolutions since the start of the 20th century, and

he shows how they changed over time. The last social revolution — understood as rapid radical transformation of state and class structures according to the classical definition of Theda Skocpol — happened in 1979. It was either the Nicaraguan Revolution or the Iranian Revolution. Since then, there have been attempts at social revolution, but none have led to social revolutionary outcomes. Beissinger shows that when we say that these upheavals are not revolutionary, it doesn’t mean that nothing changes. In fact, they do have tangible outcomes, although they are not the same as what was expected by the people who participated in the revolution or who inspired it. Beissinger, for example, writes that contemporary revolutions weaken the government and the capacity of post-revolutionary states, unlike the social revolutions, which built stronger states. Contemporary revolutions have a negative impact on economic growth. They’re not as disastrous as social revolutions in the short term, but still there is a decline. Importantly, this post-revolutionary decline is not followed by rapid modernization, as was the case with the social revolutions. Contemporary revolutions do have some impact on democratization, but that impact is short-term, and in the long-term, there is a typical authoritarian backslide. The only positive impact of contemporary revolutions, and the most tangible one, is the expansion of expressive liberties and the political opportunities for middle-class civil society. This doesn’t mean that it’s not important, but the question is who is capable of using these moments of expansion of political opportunity.

In this capacity, the different social groups and classes are highly unequal. Like in Ukraine, you had a weakly organized working class with weak trade unions and weak Leftist parties. Therefore, other groups took the opportunities in the revolutions. In the Ukrainian case, this was done by opportunistic oligarchs like Petro Poroshenko, who became the president of Ukraine, even though he was actually one of the ministers in the Yanukovych government and was one of the founders of the Party of Regions in the 1990s. He was a veteran of Ukrainian politics and one of the richest people in Ukraine. The Euromaidan was supposedly an anti-oligarchic revolution against the old elites, but it brought an oligarch to power. It’s not because the people were allegedly so stupid. No, there’s something structural about this kind of revolution: they are structurally vulnerable to being hijacked. Other groups that took advantage were the far-Right nationalists, who received arms and opportunities to infiltrate the military and police. The third group was made up of the neoliberal NGOs, who received a huge flow of Western money and the opportunity to influence the political agenda of the post-Euromaidan government via so-called “sandwich models,” i.e., via the pressure on the Ukrainian government by the West, upon which Ukraine became so dependent, in particular because of the war.

DLJ: Marx and Engels famously go through a revolution in 1848 that Marx later calls farcical. It’s a democratic revolution, a popular revolution. However, the idea that came out of this is that going into the next revolution, there would need to be a political articulation such as the organization of a party. You mentioned earlier that there was both an absence of political articulation from the working class in Ukraine, but yet, there were parties. They may not have seemed like parties but rather parts of the oligarchical structure. These revolutions have raised the question of revolution per se, but who is going to take political leadership of the revolutions?

VI: That’s a bigger question. It’s not simply about the party. I’m working on integrating this idea about contemporary revolutions into a Gramscian framework — the question of hegemony and counter-hegemony — and why contemporary revolutions reproduce the crisis of hegemony. Bessinger’s explanation is robust. He points to the fact that contemporary revolutions happen much quicker than social revolutions. The social revolutions in the 20th century were partisan, guerrilla wars in the countryside, especially in third-world countries. Those guerrilla wars developed over decades. The people who led the revolutions built their whole life careers as revolutionaries. They worked on the revolutionary cause for decades, building organizations, connecting with the working class and peasant masses in the countryside. They developed groups of intellectuals, the means of propaganda and agitation. They socialized the masses into the revolutionary cause, creating the structures of alternative power, especially if they were successful in creating the autonomous zones that could exist for years.

You mentioned the SPD. The SPD was a working-class party in an urban environment. The Party created a massive social infrastructure for the class, and they worked on that for decades. Contemporary revolutions happen in mere days. The Euromaidan Revolution lasted for about three months — unusually long. The 2011 Egyptian Revolution happened in the course of weeks. The whole idea was to bring as many people as possible to the central square, to the centers of power. This is the power of the contemporary revolutions: as quickly as possible, as many as possible, as diverse as possible. That’s why things like the brutal attack on the Euromaidan camp attack could happen, because the government did not understand what was going on and did not have the time to properly assess the situation and its consequences. Some things may happen as stupid mistakes, not as conspiracies or well-thought plans. But during the days of the Euromaidan, there was not enough time to build that scale of social infrastructure, to develop ideology, or even a clear program of post-revolutionary changes that would be shared by the masses. The leadership of contemporary revolutions do not even think of themselves as revolutionaries before the revolution starts. This is a huge difference in comparison to the leaders like Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, or Che Guevara.

But why do contemporary revolutions not have that counter-hegemonic infrastructure before the political crisis developed? We need to understand the weakness